

The two girls were idling on King's Road in London. Their chatter was typically teen-age, chirpy and lighthearted, flitting from boys and clothes to their hair. "How did you get it so green?" Debi asked her companion. "I dyed it," came the reply. "Well, I tried to dye mine green," said Debi, "but it came out orange." It didn't make all that much difference. Debi's face was splashed with multicolored paint. A safety pin was stuck through one earlobe. And on her blouse was the silk-screen

1960s and the rockers and skinheads of the early 1970s, punks sport safety pins and bizarre plumage and celebrate anarchy as their creed. In Britain, punks are primarily unemployed working-class kids seeking an outlet for their frustrations and attention for their antics. In the United States, they may just as likely be middle-class teen-agers aiming to shock their parents with a style as repulsive as possible. A true punk, according to John Holstrom, editor of the New York-based Punk magazine, is simply "an inexperienced hand who hasn't done all that well, an arrogant low-life."

Menacing as punks may look, their protest is remarkably passive and their actions more like those of the Fonz in "Happy Days" than Alex in "A Clockwork Orange." Though punks pierce their cheeks with safety pins and wear swastikas, the purpose is more visual than political. "They like the Nazi things because they are interesting decorations," explains Vivienne Westwood, 36, whose "Seditionaries" boutique in London features punk fashion. Adds Gina Steven-

ROCK

son, 20, a pink-haired San Francisco hairdresser: "This is our aggression. Everything's been done and this is the only way of doing something new to shock people."

And shock is proving to be chic. Last year, a teen-ager named Sid Vicious, now in the British punk group Sex Pistols, came home and discovered that a pair of his pants had been ripped to shreds. He was inspired to close the tears with safety pins—200 in all—and thus was a symbol born. Now punk fashion has come above ground. Punk T shirts, replete with hand-made tears, cigarette burns and slogans such as "Boredom" and "Nasty," are a hot item at Macy's in New York—at \$16 each. Both Saks Fifth Avenue and Bonwit Teller carry gold safety pins at prices up to \$100, and noted British designer Zandra Rhodes recently created a collection of gowns for Bloomingdale's that incorporate stylized rips and glitter-studded safety pins—at \$345 to \$1,150 a gown.

But the roots of the punk sensibility are in music. Influenced by groups such as Iggy and the Stooges and the now-defunct New York Dolls, a movement grew up several years ago around CBGB's, a New York Bowery bar turned underground hangout. The club's per-



Tim Jenkins—Women's Wear Daily

Punk as chic: The Zandra Rhodes look

image of Queen Elizabeth, also wearing a safety pin—through her nose.

Along with several thousand other Britons, and a growing number of French and Americans, the girls are part of a small pop-culture cult whose members call themselves punks. Successors to the Teddys of the 1950s, the mods of the

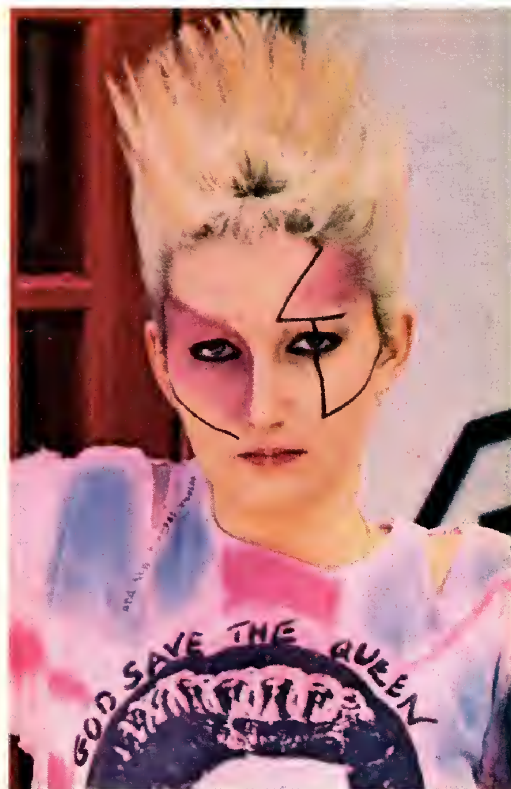
formers shared a distaste for pop rock; instead they relied on simple lyrics and chord progression, high energy and showmanship so outrageous and unpredictable that it often superseded the music. Patti Smith, for instance, came on tough, spit at the audience and recited her mystic poetry over a primitive musical backup. Richard Hell, whose recent single "We're the Blank Generation" has become a punk anthem, wore a T shirt during performances that read "Please Kill Me." Along with groups such as the Ramones, Blondie, and the Dictators, these CBGB performers began to develop followings and win record contracts.

Their British counterparts are even cruder and more defiantly offensive. The Sex Pistols, a group of working-class teenagers, reflect the punk sensibility both in their songs—"Anarchy in the U.K.," "I'm a Lazy Sod," "No Future," "Pretty Vacant"—and in their style. Lead singer Johnny Rotten screams "I hate you" at his fans and parades about the stage burning his arm with cigarettes and scratching his

face with needles. Such antics won the group a record contract, but in January it was canceled—along with most of a scheduled tour—after band members performed a vomiting act at Heathrow Airport.

Still, for teen-agers too young to relate to the Beatles or Mick Jagger and too poor to afford tickets to Rod Stewart concerts, the Sex Pistols—and groups like them—have become an accessible alternative they can call their own. The movement even has its own magazines. New York's Punk began last December with a circulation of 4,000, and Holstrom claims the figure is now up to 18,000. Imitators have since sprung up in San Francisco (Pyclone) and Los Angeles (Slash), and throughout England.

Almost by definition, the future of punk is in jeopardy: the Establishment is ripping off the painfully established punk identity. But so far, though the fashion is catching on, punks themselves are still pariahs. In Paris recently, nightclub owner and queen of the disco set



David Grieve

London punk: Shock of recognition

Régine threw a punk party. One thousand of her friends showed up—mostly in ripped T shirts, black eye make-up and fishnet stockings. Everything went fine until a bunch of uninvited genuine punks showed up. Régine had to call in the gendarmes.

—TONY SCHWARTZ with MALCOLM MacPHERSON in London and LISA WHITMAN in New York

BOTTOM

New York T-shirt designers: Safety pins, bizarre plumage and the celebration of anarchy

Allan Tannenbaum

